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C O N F I D E N T I A L RABAT 000990

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STATE FOR NEA, IO/UNP, NEA/MAG, PRM/AFR AND DRL/NESCA

E.O. 12958: DECL: 12/18/2019  
TAGS: [PHUM](#) [PREL](#) [PREF](#) [PGOV](#) [UN](#) [WI](#) [MO](#)  
SUBJECT: AMINATOU HAIDAR RETURNS SAFELY TO WESTERN SAHARA

REF: A. RABAT 0979 (NOTAL)

[1](#)B. RABAT 0977 (NOTAL)

[1](#)C. RABAT 0915 (NOTAL)

Classified By: DCM Robert P. Jackson for reasons 1.4 (b) and (d).

[1](#)1. (C) Summary: Prominent Sahrawi pro-independence activist Aminatou Haidar returned safely to the Western Sahara on December 18 aboard a Spanish military aircraft. She recovered her passport at the airport, completed normal Moroccan immigration formalities, and proceeded from the airport to her home in the company of family members. Sahrawi activists report that she has terminated her hunger strike; that she is in very good spirits; but that she is still in precarious physical condition and under close medical supervision at her home. Western Sahara-based government officials confirm that her arrival took place without incident, and that a spontaneous gathering of well-wishers had taken place with no serious security incidents. After having handled the Haidar case in disastrous fashion, the GOM finally brought the ordeal to an end -- and not a moment too soon. However, the case has left the GOM angry and badly shaken, which will create real challenges as we look toward the next round of formal UN-led Manhasset talks. End Summary.

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Home Safely  
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[1](#)2. (SBU) Aminatou Haidar, President of the Collective of Sahrawi Human Rights Defenders (CODESA) and a prominent Sahrawi pro-independence activist, returned safely to her home in Laayoune, Western Sahara, in the early hours of December 18. Haidar arrived shortly after 2:00 AM local time (GMT) aboard a Spanish military plane specially equipped to handle medical emergencies, and in the company of her sister and a physician. By prior agreement among Haidar and the Governments of Morocco and Spain, there were no journalists or other passengers aboard, according to Laayoune-based Moroccan Ministry of Interior (MOI) officials. As Haidar arrived, immigration officers met her plane-side and handed her the passport they had confiscated on November 13 (Ref C), and she proceeded to complete normal customs and immigration formalities. There was a beefed-up police presence at the airport, but only Haidar's brother and an uncle came to meet her; by all accounts, she exited the airport without incident, and they drove her home.

[1](#)3. (SBU) Haidar's return marked the end of a 35-day exile and of a hunger strike that had reportedly taken a terrible physical toll on her. On December 16, her health had deteriorated to the point that she had to be hospitalized in Lanzarote, and she remains in precarious but stable condition now at her home in Laayoune. Djimi Elghalya, a CODESA member and the Vice Chair of the Association of Victims of Grave

Human Rights Violations (ASVDH), confirmed by phone that Haider has ended her hunger strike and is beginning to take food under close medical supervision; she is extremely weak, but "her spirit is extremely strong."

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Supporters Jubilant, Laayoune Calm  
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¶4. (SBU) At Haidar's home, a large, jubilant and peaceful crowd turned out in the middle of the night to greet her, according to both press reports and participants. CODESA members told the Embassy that several hundred Sahrawis -- ranging from independence activists to apolitical well-wishers -- gathered to celebrate "a great victory for international law and human rights." Celebrations near her home continued into the late morning, and there were reportedly other gatherings throughout Laayoune. Elghalya said that supporters had intentionally stayed away from the airport, recognizing that the police presence there would be heavy and in a specific effort to avoid any kind of incident. However, she added, no one could keep away the "hundreds" who spontaneously gathered at Haidar's home. Elghalya noted that there were also police around Haidar's home, but they limited themselves to keeping order and did not try to interfere with the celebrations. Separately, Mohammed Jelmous, the Wali of Laayoune (i.e., the Governor and senior MOI official), said that a small group of "youths" who oppose Western Saharan independence did attempt to gain access to the crowds in front of Haidar's home, but police quickly ushered them away after one threw a rock that hit -- but did not seriously injure -- a Spanish journalist. Otherwise, the Wali reported, as of noon Laayoune time, the city was calm.

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Comment: An Ordeal Ended  
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¶5. (C) Haidar's return comes not a moment too soon, especially in light of the serious down-turn her health had taken in recent days. It also brings to a close a disastrous episode for the GOM, which drew dangerously close not only to perpetrating a case of forced exile, but also to badly jeopardizing its relationships with Spain and other allies through its belligerent handling of the case and some stunningly maladroitness diplomacy. Local press and our Laayoune-based Sahrawi contacts have given enormous credit to the U.S., France and to a lesser extent Spain for pressing the GOM to find a solution to the problem. GOM officials have grudgingly acknowledged that the tough -- and consistent -- messages that Minister of Foreign Affairs and Cooperation Taieb Fassi Fihri heard on his recent travels to Europe and the U.S. (Ref A) were crucial to the GOM's rather sudden change of heart. Even the provincial Wali in Laayoune told PolCouns, "You see, we listen to our friends." This said, we will need to be mindful that the whole Haidar case has left the GOM badly shaken; indeed, Moroccan officials' (and, we suspect, the other parties') anger and distrust, especially toward Algeria, has reached its highest level in recent years. As we look to a fifth round of formal UN-led Manhasset talks, Ambassador Ross, and we, have our work cut out for us. End Comment.

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